You think beating the shit out of each other is love?
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You think beating the shit out of each other is love?

by orphan_account

Summary

The skeletons, the basement, the bibles and cards and the edge of the scalpel breaking skin all felt a little bit like love. *(What is love to you?)*

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

"*What is love to you*?" The professor had asked, wombling between the whiteboard and around the room to ensure the class was focused and not on their phones or creating elaborate traps to ensnare bugs in to later blow them up or whatever the hell it was that Alex did in his spare time. They sat in the corner of the room, Alex leaning against the window to look *cool* and *unbothered*, and *not* have his back to Nigel, chewing on a pencil and acting normal and boringly unremarkable on the other side of the room.

Alex paid no attention to the question, deeming it one, unimportant, and two, pretentious. There were more important tasks to be called to, such as devising elaborate torture methods for the local insect population. He was doing everyone a favour, with how the cleaning staff never paid any attention to the exponentially expanding cockroach population and subsequent infestation – it's not like they were a protected species under any ethical convention, anyway.

He shuffled his balance onto one leg, leaning against the window for further support. He was fixated on Nigel, unease creeping along his spinal cord the longer he stared. He felt sickened watching him, how he appeared so unassuming yet had a suitcase filled with, among other concerning items, a taxidermized rat the size of a small child. He had written books with words in medical cursive-styled handwriting unfamiliar to him, such as *absolute convergence* and *disc integration*, which Alex could only assume was some form of witchcraft or some other heresy.

Nigel's collection of bugs neatly labelled and displayed in alphabetical order with bibliographies attached in small Helvetica font at the bottom of each specimen unnerved Alex. To hold something with such care yet so clinically set Alex off. It was almost *loving,* to preserve such specimens for all eternity to be adorned in a case concealed from the horrors of *outside*, assuming love was an emotion Nigel could produce. They didn't deserve to be handled in such a way – such small and weak things deserved to be cast away in some corner of God-knows-where and discarded. There was no place or belonging for such weakness in this world, for nothing good would ever come of something so miniscule, Alex had diagnosed.

What did such insignificant things do to deserve Nigel's focus, Alex had wondered as he carved a vaguely penis-shaped figure into the table with his pencil. Alex found himself obsessing over him, which he concluded was a normal reaction to protect himself from getting murdered by some serial killer – which he assumed Nigel was because

there were only so many reasons for a seventeen-year-old to dissect a bird (located from fuck knows where) on some rickety table with a couple of scalpels and an IV bag filled with a fluid that was definitely not the normal kind found attached to dying elderly patients dying of renal failure in hospitals.

Love was nothing but an emotion that gets one pinned to a corkboard and flayed, to be exposed and observed as though you were just another *experiment*. Alex had no intention of ending up with the same fate.

Due to what he could only explain as missing multiple sections of his brain and an under-developed prefrontal cortex, Alex had found himself being dragged along by Nigel at one in the morning to his house, where Alex assumed he would then be drugged and then killed. Blaming what he assumed was a tumour growing in his amygdala causing his fear response to be lower than one seen in a *rock*, Alex got out of bed, willingly, and followed Nigel onto the train, willingly, where he then continued to follow Nigel, willingly.

It was dark and miserable and wet and a very good opportunity to get robbed, which made it even more surprising when none of Alex's worries came to fruition, although there was still plenty of time in the night to have *fun* if fun was following a guy prone to magical thinking into their basement. It was far from the first time he had visited, recalling how despairing the first time Alex plunged into the basement was. He figured he would follow Nigel anywhere, at this point, there was nowhere Nigel could go where Alex couldn't reach, for even the depths of his insanity were mapped out clearly for him to track.

("I've never brought anybody here before," Nigel had explained, after unlocking the gate leading into what Alex assumed was the abyss itself, "You're the first, okay? First.").

There had been something arcane following the words Nigel had said that first meeting, leaving Alex emboldened and vulnerable at the same time. To be openly allowed into a section of Nigel's life that had been concealed from those around him had left Alex giddy and yet so astonishingly *frightened*. It was small and weak and almost as though it were on the other side of, or parallel, or perpendicular, to something akin to *love*.

Despite everything they got along well enough if getting along was being in the same room together and sometimes helping (leeching) off Nigel's work so that Alex could spend the rest of his time fucking around on trains and creating rudimentary car bombs to place on whichever teacher tried to call him out for bludging. Nigel was still incorrigible in his delusions, but Alex was only so much better with his constant torment of whatever train driver happened to be on shift whenever he got bored.

The first night Alex had allowed himself to follow Nigel down into the basement that seemed to be plunged in darkness, had made Alex feel less like he was stepping into a room below the house and more that he had walked directly into Nigel's mind if Nigel's mind was filled with dust and completely deserted from anything sane or remotely human. Which was, *well*.

Alex recalled the events of the first night he followed Nigel here, how they ended up hiding from a madman with a gun, who also happened to be Nigel's father, which quite frankly explained more than it should have – How Nigel's eyes had diverted away from Alex's and had flitted closed for only a second upon the noise of a door unlocking above the stairs, before he had turned to Alex, whispering "he's got a gun," Nigel's gaze never returning to his partner. How Alex, for all his imminent neurological damage, understood his role in the local ecosystem of a minor inconvenience, how he should never act out of his role when in the presence of those more dangerous than him, such as in situation like the one that had played out. How he had stared at Nigel, the realisation that he never panicked and instead had remained fixed where he stood made Alex feel the size of a jumping spider he had once impaled through the abdomen. How Nigel was still save for the movement of his neck as he had swallowed. *How Nigel had moved on almost instantly afterwards*.

Moving throughout the basement was second nature to Alex, weaving effortlessly between the boards and planks and dust that probably contained asbestos and some ancient bacteria that would colonise their hypothalamus and kill them both one day. He had followed Nigel to his *hiding place* countless times, almost becoming something akin to a comfort for the both of them.

As far as Alex was concerned, Nigel was batshit insane. He had shown Alex, that first night, the room he had carved out for himself to abscond from the world around him, where he collected his thoughts from what Alex assumed was the fourth-fucking-dimension, and noted them neatly within the countless books stashed away. Skulls and

anatomical models lining the room and it smelled perpetually of black mold and methane. It was awful yet Alex found himself drawn to it, because Alex was in the business of believing himself to be a part of some bigger destiny, because Nigel had told him he was. The basement was small and cramped and *theirs*.

Alex relaxed to the best of his ability within the cramped space, watching Nigel hit his head countless times moving to show Alex whatever new specimen he had dissected or information he had uncovered. The distanced, omnipotent *bastard* air had been replaced with something *real,* for there was nothing more human than rapidly descending into a schizophrenia spectrum disorder. Alex found himself paying close attention to how Nigel changed when they were alone with no cameras or people or anything alive to watch him. Nigel always moved to sit close to Alex, their shoulders and knees touching and intruding on one another's space, as though he were trying to become combined as one, in both body and mind. His skin always measured cold, as though he were some kind of ghost that would disappear should Alex look away for too long, haunting him. Alex would often move to wrap Nigel in his own clothes, all while calling him a frigid whore at the same time.

It was a bond unknown to Alex, to feel as though their minds were one. A filling of the hole in his heart he didn't know existed, mortar seeping between the cracks and replacing them with a newfound integrity. His chest ached as he thought of his mother, wondering if the affection he expressed was ever experienced by her, towards his father, towards even Alex, despite having never met. He couldn't imagine his father having such a bond. He couldn't imagine such kindness, couldn't imagine *affection*.

The book Nigel proceeded to place in Alex's hand was filled with hand-drawn devices to cause problems for other people. Nigel was concerningly enthusiastic about assisting Alex with his mechanisms, far too happy to create some new torture device for Alex to use against whatever subject he found. He was horribly enabling, and Alex felt as though he was becoming dependent on Nigel's presence as though it were some kind of SSRI that would cause dreadful side effects should he experience withdrawal symptoms from not being around Nigel, or if Nigel were a drug that had barely passed phase three clinical trials, and was most likely going to kill him one way or another.

Deep beneath the floorboards of a house hostile to their union, Alex found himself free to be as violent or egotistical he wanted, with no

judgement offered from his partner. He was free to complain and whine and mope without having to worry about the expectations and standards he was held to so constantly, able to be awful and *welcomed for it*. There was no ideal he had to embody, no person he needed to act. There was only ever one thing Nigel expected of Alex, and that was just for him to be nearby.

Nigel grabbed Alex's hand and placed it firmly on the table, very lightly tracing a scalpel across the skin of Alex's hand in the shape of the pike and the loops it surrounded, blood very lightly bubbling over the scars. It stung yet Alex made no attempt to move away, observing Nigel's careful carving of Alex's skin with intent derived from every nerve of his body. The depth of the scalpel piercing skin was enough to leave a lasting scar, yet not enough to cause permanent harm. It was placed on his dominant hand, almost as though it were like Alex would always be directing the pike, directing Nigel, to whatever he desired.

It was them and them alone against the world surrounding them, joined through some kind of unwanted but desperately craved telepathy. The skeletons, the basement, the bibles and cards and the edge of the scalpel breaking skin all felt a little bit like *love*.

When Alex struck Nigel, the last thing he expected to hear from Nigel was a confession.

The train bolting against the tracks reverberated through Alex's head as he held Nigel against the window, his bloodied hands fisted in Nigel's collar. Alex felt adrenaline pulsing through his muscles as he held Nigel firmly in place. Their bodies shook with the movement of the train over the tracks, Alex disallowing Nigel to escape from his grip. Nigel's right eye was bruised and black, yet Alex's temple was inflamed itself – they were *dogs*.

Nigel's teasing and prodding had provoked Alex into a person he didn't wish to be but was familiar to every cell that composed his body. He felt violent, like he was staring down at some worthlessly small bug – it felt inescapable, genetic and molecular.

"Jack," Nigel gasped.

Alex lunged forward, surrounding Nigel's neck with his hands, "I told you not to call me that," Alex's voice was unfamiliar to his ears, sounding less like himself and more like *someone* else's. There should have been someone to stop them, an intervention in some other universe. But there were no other universes (or maybe there were, but they all converged into a singular point in time, forever leading to this moment without failure), and there was no one else on the train – or with how insane Nigel made Alex feel, *the world*, in the grand scheme of things – that could stop them as they hurtled towards something explosive.

Alex's knuckles ached where they had made contact with Nigel's face, Alex almost finding himself fond of the way they bruised and blackened Nigel's skin. It was as though his cortices had failed him, blindly jumping to an impulsivity that he tried in vain to bury countless times. Nigel brought out the worst in him, yet he also made Alex feel alive in a way no drug nor psychiatrist ever could. He was unsure if he wanted to break down and sob, or relent to whatever genetic sequence compelled him.

Breathing heavily beneath him, Nigel was no different from Alex, once more some reflection to the furthest edges of his being, nestled into his bone marrow the way blood does to ensure safety from ultraviolet radiation. Nigel was just as prone to vicious malady as Alex was, if not more so manifesting in a way that would surely kill them both. Whatever ailment Alex was inflicted with was paralleled in Nigel; the code that defined them inherited from their parents all the same. They were both holding up mirrors. Their connection indefinable by modern mathematics, un-modellable by algorithms and anything natural.

The only difference separating them was their method; Alex defaced his own body through physical offence, while Nigel tended towards tools, blemishing skin not with his own but instead with the barrel of a gun.

"*Alex.*"

The clamour of the train was silenced faster than any neuron in Alex's brain could fire, his name drawing him back to reality instead of whatever downward spiral he was plummeting into. His hold on Nigel decayed, the weakness ebbing out of his muscles, leaving him nothing but drained, exhausted. He turned away from Nigel, barely moving meters before slumping against the racketing walls of the train, his hands tracking blood as he slid downwards, the floor cold and

neutralising against his skin.

Alex stared at Nigel through lidded eyes, watching as the other carefully mimicked his actions. “I despise you,” Alex groaned.

“It’s the mark of our union,” Nigel smiled. “The blood is the attainment of our bond.”

“You really think *this-”* Alex gestured towards Nigel’s bloodied eye, the blood staining their clothes and clotted on Alex’s forehead “Is what binds us?”

Nigel tilted his head, “Of course it is. We share the same fragility. I know you’re *just like me*. It’s proof of our love.”

“*Love?”* Alex found his head reeling for an entirely different reason to the headache.

Nigel’s expression changed to one of confusion. “Of course, love. What else could it be, how else could it manifest?”

“You think beating the shit out of each other is *love?*”

“It’s what it’s always been. The presence my father’s guns keep, the absence of yours, the cruelty our forebearers wrought – that’s what love is. Love is something that propels oneself to destroy.”

Alex stared at Nigel. “Do you love me?”

“I love you,” Nigel spoke easily, without hesitation and with the clarity of knowing something Alex didn’t. “I’m the pike, the spade, the spear,” Nigel moved closer, leaning towards Alex’s ear. “I’ll be the tool to transform your desires. I will withstand whatever mission you command.”

Alex wondered if he was experiencing an aneurysm as he studied Nigel, the way he spoke so easily of something so devoid of warmth. How Nigel could seem ‘normal’ at one moment and then swing wildly into delusion the next, some warped perception of everything happening around him, as though it were some form of *protection*.

“I don’t,” Alex found his voice failing on him, “I don’t want you to do that. I don’t know exactly what’s wrong with you – I don’t think whatever you’ve got is even *named* – but that’s not,” Alex thought back to his parents, before the basement returned to his mind. He recalled the nights they spent huddled beneath the foundations, of

how liberated they were from the world, how fond he looked back on those memories.

“That’s not what love is.”

“Then what is it?” Nigel pressed.

Alex groaned, “I don’t fucking know, man. But it’s not that. Love is when you’re showing me your stupid fucking pets, or you helping me find ways to hide evidence of whatever new torture device I made, or when we’re in that stupid basement.”

Certain of his brain damage, Alex found himself cursing as Nigel failed to respond, contemplating methods of jumping off the train that would maximise his chance of killing himself and arranging them in alphabetical order within his mind.

“I think I understand,” Nigel spoke after a pause.

“Do you?”

“Yes. Love is eternity.”

Alex rolled his head to look squarely at Nigel, whose own expression was distant. “That doesn’t make *any* sense to me, but you tend not to in the first place, so long as you’re not continuing about whatever the hell you were talking about earlier, then. Fine. It’s fine.” Alex rubbed his fingers over the scabs that began to form over his knuckles.

“Do you love me, Jack?” Nigel’s expression moved to Alex’s face, fixed. “*Alex?*”

The movement of the train swayed them gently, the windows darkened and the light fixture above them flickering in and out of power recurrently. They were the complementary strands of a deoxyribose nucleic acid molecule, binding perfectly to one another. They were both echoes of their fathers, a result of their upbringings, containing flaws that would surely, definitely, end in disaster. Whatever was in their blood was in the water.

Alex returned Nigel's gaze steadily, welcoming wholly whatever love laid buried within, "Of course I do."

End Notes

THANK U FOR READING i dont really like this one as much i feel like this one is weaker than my other works and that i didnt really communicate what i wanted but. whatever its fine
i feel so cringe posting so often in the tag LOL.... hides.
i feel like alex was left all alone in a cardboard box sopping wet and has no concept of love and nigels is just. way Out There . you know
my computer is acting up and deleting parts of sentences so if anything seems deleted please let me know <3

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